



PRESS RELEASE

House National Security Committee

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 18, 1996

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STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FLOYD SPENCE

FULL COMMITTEE HEARING ON KHOBAR TOWERS BOMBING

SEPTEMBER 18, 1996

Today the committee will review the June 25, 1996 terrorist attack against U.S. service personnel in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Nineteen American servicemen lost their lives, and hundreds of others, including Saudi citizens, suffered horrible wounds as the result of this cowardly act of terror.

While the committee endorsed legislation last week honoring the victims, it is equally important that we confront the many issues raised by this unfortunate tragedy.

Since June, both this committee and the Department of Defense task force led by retired General Wayne Downing — one of our witnesses here today — have investigated the circumstances surrounding the bombing. The conclusions of the two reports are strikingly similar.

Both identify significant failures of intelligence. While terrorist organizations can be difficult targets for intelligence gathering, the inability of the Department of Defense to fully appreciate the changing threat to our troops deployed in Saudi Arabia is disturbing. Even after the first bombing in the Saudi capital of Riyadh in November 1995, formal threat assessments apparently never credited potential future threats with capabilities beyond those already demonstrated. General Downing concluded, "The ability of the theater and national intelligence community to conduct in-depth, long-term analysis of trends, intentions and capabilities of terrorists is deficient."

Even more disturbing are the Department's own organizational and institutional failures. Operation Southern Watch has been in existence since the Gulf War. Since 1994, when Iraq moved forces back toward Kuwait, and as the events of the past weeks confirm yet again, there has been little doubt that Saddam Hussein is not prepared to comply with the UN Resolutions that established the no-fly zone mission.

Yet, the Administration has perpetuated the fiction that Southern Watch is a temporary contingency operation. The practical result has been that troops deployed to Saudi Arabia are confused about their basic mission. As one former squadron commander observed in his end-of-tour report, "For some reason, we cannot or will not decide whether we are in a contingency deployment, a normal [temporary duty situation], or assigned to a [Major Command] staff. The constant changing of gears confuses the troops, erodes our effectiveness as leaders, and adversely impacts the mission."

General Downing's report has, I believe, correctly noted the obvious: Operation Southern Watch is a long-term U.S. commitment manned and resourced as though it were a short-term contingency operation. It should come as no surprise that undermanned units with troops serving short tours of duty lacked the resources or cohesion to carry out their mission. Nor should it be any surprise that under such circumstances, the risk to deployed U.S. troops at Khobar Towers or throughout the region was higher.

As a side note, this Committee highlighted this very issue last year when it authorized funding for Operation Southern Watch through normal budget channels and required the Department to designate the operation as a "forward presence" and not a contingency operation. However, despite having made such a designation, it is clear that the Department continued to run Southern Watch as a temporary contingency.

As General Downing observes, overall responsibility for the conduct of Operation Southern Watch, including force protection issues, lies properly with the chain of command. As the theater command vested with direct responsibility for the region, U.S. Central Command has been rightly criticized for the lack of guidance and support to the troops deployed in Saudi Arabia. For example, Central Command failed to physically inspect Khobar Towers and to review the vulnerability assessments, rotation policy, terrorism training or overall mission structure even after the November 1995 terrorist bombing in Riyadh. Units remained understaffed, inadequately trained for terrorism threats, and lacking standards for physical security. Despite these concerns, CENTCOM apparently passively accepted the Air Force's manning and rotation policies.

Despite Secretary Perry's expressed support for General Peay, the CENTCOM commander-in-chief, it is apparent that many of the failures that contributed to the unpreparedness and vulnerability of our forces in Saudi Arabia to an act of terror must be laid at CENTCOM's feet.

General Downing's report also raises serious concerns about the role of senior Pentagon officials. The Joint Chiefs of Staff is criticized for failing to challenge the command relationships, structures and resources of the task force deployed in support of Operation Southern Watch as its mission expanded, its mandate lengthened and the threat to U.S. forces changed. But while the JCS has a central role to play in all military operations, under the law, it remains an advisory body that is not in the formal chain of command. Therefore, on the issue of accountability, it is not clear to me that the Downing report upholds the cardinal principle that the military chain of accountability is the same as the chain of command. One of the key reforms of the Goldwater-Nichols legislation was to eliminate any ambiguity over the chain of command by having it flow directly from the CINC in the field to the Secretary of Defense... not to the Joint Chiefs. This is an issue that clearly merits further discussion.

In conclusion, let me commend the vigor with which the Department has moved out on new force protection measures. When U.S. troops are deployed abroad they deserve every protection consistent with the mission they have been sent to execute. However, many of us are left with the nagging

conclusion that the measures now being so aggressively implemented should have been undertaken sooner.

To help us address these difficult issues, I am pleased to welcome Secretary Perry and General Shalikashvili back to the committee this morning.

Let me also welcome General Downing, a soldier's soldier who served with distinction throughout his long career.

Before proceeding, the Chair would remind members that the purpose of the hearing today is to explore the June 25 Saudi bombing and related issues. While some of these issues may stray into questions associated with current events in the Persian Gulf and while Secretary Perry may choose to comment briefly on the current situation with regard to Iraq, the Committee has scheduled a hearing to specifically focus on the Iraqi situation for next week. Accordingly, I would ask for the cooperation of all members in staying focused on the issue at hand.